



CALIFORNIA ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH TRACKING PROGRAM

Community Perspective on Environmental Health Tracking

HEALTH HOMES COLLABORATIVE

BACKGROUND

Lead levels for children in low-income communities of color, particularly in urban areas, continue to be above the national average. Much of the housing in these communities was built before the residential use of lead based paints was banned in 1978. Residents in such housing, particularly in poorly kept properties, are at an increased risk for lead exposure. In Los Angeles, California, about 80% of the housing was built before 1978. Household lead exposure is a major environmental health concern for the community.

ORGANIZATIONAL GOALS

The Healthy Homes Collaborative (HHC) is an association of community-based organizations and community leaders from within Los Angeles County, dedicated to improving housing conditions that affect health. Members of the collaborative represent a variety of interests, including affordable housing and tenants' rights, children's health/rights, environmental justice, public interest law, and general community issues.

HHC is involved with a variety of data collection activities, such as health surveys, visual surveys of dwellings, and environmental sampling. It is also involved with community education and capacity building activities and emphasizes the importance of having community input during policymaking and strategy implementation.

Priority health concerns identified by the collaborative include access to health care, quality of health care delivery systems, and conditions caused by substandard housing, poverty, and deferred health care. Household lead exposure and lead poisoning is among the health issues HHC currently addresses.

ACTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

The collaborative is engaged in a variety of lead poisoning prevention and abatement activities. These activities include monitoring before and after abatement efforts, organizing around building repairs, and sampling for lead in dust, paint, and soil. The collaborative recently received funding from the Los Angeles County Department of Health Services to provide community outreach and education services to eliminate childhood lead poisoning.

BARRIERS AND LIMITATIONS

Access to blood lead screening is one barrier to preventing lead poisoning. Limited access to medical services for low-income residents is a major factor. Even when services are available, physicians may not comply with screening activities. HHC notes that a common misconception among medical professionals in Los Angeles is that lead poisoning only a problem on the East Coast. This perception may contribute to an unwillingness to perform lead screening.

Barriers to identification of hazardous dwellings also affect prevention efforts. A contributor to these barriers is poor interagency communication. Until recently, lead related activities by the Los Angeles County Department of Health Services and the County Housing Department were not coordinated. For example, the department of health services was not informed of the housing department's lead abatement activities, thereby missing opportunities to identify potentially poisoned children. Another barrier has been the level of standards used by county agencies. Until recently, the county health department's blood lead level of action was twice the CDC recommended action level, and it has only been this year that the housing department began to assume the use of lead based paint in pre-1978 housing.

In their partnership with the county department of health services, HHC has encountered direct barriers to their county-funded outreach and abatement efforts due to data accessibility issues. In order to target individuals at risk, HHC planned to do specific outreach to residents of housing complexes where children had been previously identified as lead poisoned. However, restricted access to the county's confidential data prevented the implementation of this outreach plan.

The Healthy Homes Collaborative is experienced in data collection, outreach and education, community organizing, and advocacy. HHC's partnership with the Los Angeles County Department of Health Services demonstrates the county's recognition of the collaborative's expertise and capacity to do work at the county level. While illustrating how agencies can partner and combine their resources to achieve common goals, it also highlights some of the challenges that can arise when limitations in data sharing prevents qualified community organizations from completing proposed activities.

The Healthy Homes Collaborative has indicated that an environmental health tracking system should:

- 1) Encourage interagency communication
- 2) Provide state and local health department data that is timely and coherent
- 3) Facilitate a process by which specially selected or qualified NGOs can be granted permission to use sensitive/confidential data to do work for the county
- 4) Increase capacity for GIS mapping

RESULTS AND OUTCOMES

HOW ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH TRACKING CAN HELP